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AUTHOR Hurley, Sandra R.; Wooden, Sharon L.
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the nature of reading difficulties from the perspective of sixth graders in a low-income school district on the border of New Mexico, Texas, and Mexico. R. C. Bogdan and S. K. Biklin (1992) describe this style of research as an attempt to gain entry into the conceptual world of subjects to understand what meaning they construct around events in their lives. Participants were five Chapter 1 students. Three 50-minute interviews using a modified version of I. E. Seidman's (1991) model were conducted with each participant. The first interview centered on how the student became a low achieving reader; the second centered on current experiences; and the third centered on what the experiences meant to the student. In addition, students were observed for at least three class periods. Observations were done during regular reading class, compensatory reading class, and a content area class like social studies. Transcripts from the interviews with two of the students in particular point to a relationship between violence in the home and poor performance in school. The students themselves make this connection; it is also supported by the research of C. C. Bell and E. J. Jenkins (1991). There is sufficient evidence in this study, together with that of other studies, to suggest that further research must be done to flesh out what educators know about the relationship between exposure to violence in early grades and difficulties with literacy acquisition and achievement. (Contains 33 references.) (TB)

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LEARNING TO READ IN A VIOLENT SOCIETY -- IT'S NOT NATURAL OR EASY!

PRESENTERS:

Sandra R. Hurley, Ph.D.
University of Texas at El Paso
500 W. University, 601 Ed. Bldg.
El Paso, TX 79968-0574
(915) 747-7676

Sharon L. Wooden, Ed.D.
New Mexico State University
Box 30001, Dept. 3CUR
Las Cruces, NM 88003
(505) 646-2125

Paper presented at the 22ND SOUTHWEST IRA REGIONAL CONFERENCE -- READING: IT'S A NATURAL
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Lisa: Maybe if the teachers know, maybe they would help. I would help her if I was a teacher.

Introduction

Lisa (all names are pseudonyms) was a student interviewed in a study of the personal histories of low achieving sixth grade readers. She was one of several students I worked with during this study and as a classroom teacher, who had witnessed community or domestic violence and who related their difficulty in reading achievement to those experiences.

Description of the Study

Personal History Case Studies

Ways to reduce the number of illiterates and extend the benefits of reading has been researched for decades (Lipson & Wixson, 1986). Yet the question, "How can students go through years of schooling and still not be able to read?" (Kos, 1991, p. 876) remains unanswered. Probably no area of human learning has been investigated so thoroughly. However, the volumes of research reveal few studies employing personal histories of low achieving readers (Johnston, 1985; Kos, 1991) and "a useful understanding will only emerge from an integrated examination of the cognitive, affective, social, and personal history of the learner" (Johnston, 1985, p. 155). This study's purpose was to explore the personal histories of low achieving readers. A major premise was that understanding the experiences of low achievers is central to understanding the complexities of low reading achievement.

Case studies using personal history interviews are found in many areas of study, including sociological and anthropological research (Marshall & Rossman, 1989), feminist studies (Gluck & Patai, 1991), history (Crawford, 1974), and education (e.g., Johnston, 1985,;Kos, 1991; Wolcott, 1973). Several studies have found the reader's perspective can provide valuable information (Kos, 1991). Many students seem to have the ability to describe their reading problem and are able to provide useful information about their literacy experiences (Miller & Yochum 1991; Opitz, 1990). That their perceptions are in large part reflection of their experiences (Langholz, 1990; Michel, 1994) lends impetus to the need to collect and analyze personal history case studies. Taylor (1993) reminds us a precedent for considering life experiences in combination with education was established 50 years ago by John Dewey (1938) who said, "the intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education" (p. 20) must be understood.

Studies from the child's point of view have provided much insight about how children successfully learn to read and write (Teale & Sulzby, 1989). But, there has not been an equivalent effort to understand from the child's vantage point, how children come to be unsuccessful readers and "while the effects of new research findings on the acquisition of literacy are resulting in changes in the teaching of reading to young children, little change has been noted in the instruction provided to older disabled readers" (Kos, 1991, p. 876).

Indepth Interviews

Phenomenological interviewing was the primary method of investigation. Bogdan and Biklin (1992) describe this as an attempt to gain entry into the conceptual world of subjects to understand what meaning they construct around events in their lives. Three 50 minute interviews using a modified version of Seidman's (1991) model were conducted with each participant. Interviews were three to seven days apart; each was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The first interview centered around how the student came to be a low achieving reader. The second interview focused on current experiences. The third interview explored what the experiences meant to the student. Meaning in this context "addresses the intellectual and emotional connections" (Seidman, 1991, p.12) between the experiences and the participant's life as a low achieving reading student.

Weaknesses of interviewing include: (a) interviews produce results which cannot be replicated, (b) interviewing required three to four hours with each participant and several hours of transcribing were necessary for each hour recorded, (c) data obtained can be difficult to analyze because of the quantity of material and variety of responses, and (d) a substantial time investment was required of each student; their participation can be "time consuming, privacy endangering, and intellectually and emotionally demanding" (McCracken, 1988, p.27).

There are many positive aspects of indepth interviews. A maximum of rapport can develop because of the face-to-face format (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) and the relationship building that occurs by returning three times to talk (Seidman, 1991). More accurate responses on sensitive issues and a more complete picture can result (Seidman, 1991). Benefits for the participants include: being the center of attention, stating a case that otherwise would go unheard, engaging in a self-scrutinizing, reflective process, and being involved in a cathartic process (McCracken, 1988). Students can gain

enhanced status and prestige from their access to the investigator (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988). Because of the weaknesses inherent in this type of research, multiple sources were used to contextualize and inform the interview material.

Triangulation

Williamson, Karp, Dalphin, and Gray (1982) suggest the use of multiple measures to concentrate on the point at which a series of independent, indirect, and perhaps weak indicators can converge to maximize overall validity. Denzin (1989) identifies "triangulation, or the use of multiple methods" (p. 236) as an important way to strengthen credibility. Therefore, in addition to interviews, classroom observations were done, participants' educational histories as maintained by their school were examined, and each completed a reading attitude survey and a test of self identity.

Each participant was observed for at least three class periods. The observations were done in a regular reading class, compensatory reading class, and a content area class where the student was expected to read (e.g., social studies) (Kos, 1991). The observations were used to inform and contextualize interview material.

The educational records of each student were examined. Data was collected and tabulated concerning grades, achievement testing, attendance, family information, and records of behavior patterns (Kos, 1991).

The Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990) provided scores for students' attitudes toward recreational and academic reading. Student responses to the Twenty-Statements Test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954) were compiled and tabulated for individual and cross case analysis.

The Schools and the Participants

The study was done in a school district located on the border of New Mexico, Texas, and Mexico. This rural district is located between two large cities, covers 1,300 square miles with 16 schools, has a diverse population of 10,840 students, and a tradition of 100 years of bilingual education. Ninety-three percent of the students qualify for the school lunch program, average family income is less than $12,000 a year, and 35% are served by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act Chapter 1 (GISD Report Card, 1992-93). The district used a score below the 25th percentile in reading on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills as criterion for placement in Chapter 1 reading.

Purposeful sampling (Patton, 1980) was used in participant selection. Participants were five sixth grade students in Chapter 1 reading. No student with diagnosed learning disabilities or who qualified for special education was included. Efforts to create contrasts in the respondent pool included: (a) selecting respondents from a variety of schools, (b) gender, and (c) first language. A compelling theme in the personal histories of two students was domestic violence and its relationship to literacy learning.

School Children and Violence

News reports and statistics indicate large numbers of school age children are exposed to violence (Adler, 1994; Bell & Jenkins, 1991). "Little data exist on the actual extent of children's witnessing of violence" (Bell & Jenkins, 1991, p. 176). However based on surveys and studies done in Chicago, Boston, New Orleans, and Los Angeles by a variety of researchers, Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelyn, and Pardo (1992) estimate thousands of children witness family and community violence each year. At least 3.3 million annually witness parental abuse (Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990).

Little research has focused on children and adolescents who witness violence (Groves, Zuckerman, Marans, & Cohen, 1993). This became very evident as I began a literature search on the subject. Almost all entries found in data bases and indices related to violence <u>in</u> schools and how to prevent it, for example through the use of metal detectors and more security officers. There were few entries about violence <u>out</u> of schools and its effect on learning <u>in</u> school. However, the few studies found indicate a relationship may exist between living in violence and reading. The research suggests that if there is a relationship it is not a simple one, but possibly includes both a negative effect of violence on literacy acquisition and development and a positive effect of competence in reading on a child's resilience.

Recently Garbarino and his colleagues (1992) published comparisons between Chicago children who live in areas with high incidence of violence and children of war in Mozambique, Cambodia, and the West Bank. Adverse effects of exposure to violence include the child's ability to function in school, emotional stability, and orientation toward the future. Child witnesses of domestic violence may be especially vulnerable to emotional and developmental problems (Groves, Zuckerman, Marans, & Cohen, 1993; Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990; Silvern & Kaersvang, 1989).

Results of a longitudinal study which followed a cohort of 698 from prenatal to age 32 identified a variety of risk factors, among them parental discord and alcoholism. Sixty-six percent of the high risk children developed serious learning and/or behavioral problems. Among the protective factors which enabled some to grow into resilient adults was competence in reading (Werner, 1989).

The effect of living in or witnessing violence on students' reading achievement has apparently not been addressed specifically but children who have been exposed to violence may have lowered self-esteem (Hyman, Zelikoff, & Clarke, 1988) and show a decline in cognitive performance and school achievement" (Bell & Jenkins, 1991, p. 178). Witnessing one life-threatening violent act is an event traumatic enough to require intervention (Bell & Jenkins, 1991). The effect of violence, without counseling other intervention, on literacy learning can only be surmised. Dyson (1990) states that because "exposure to violence has a significant affect on learning and behavior problems in school, violence screening is essential in the diagnostic evaluation of children who experience school failure" (p. 17). Both of the students (Lisa and Stephanie) discussed in the next section, had experienced school failure. In addition to their placement in compensatory reading classes, Lisa had repeated fourth grade and Stephanie had been "conditionally passed" rather than being promoted four of her seven years of schooling. Neither of the girls had been interviewed nor had their perspective been sought as part of the reading diagnosis or the child study meetings relative to grade retentions.

Findings

In the first stage of analysis, the 60 plus pages of verbatim transcript for each participant was read and condensed to produce a profile of the student's life history in his or her own words. These profile excerpts are from interview three when these two girls were asked to make meaning of their life experiences in relation to low reading achievement. Their words are sequenced as they were in the original verbatim transcripts. Changes to the transcripts are limited to deleting the interviewer's questions and comments, participant repetitions and extraneous language (for example "you know," "and so"), and some idiosyncrasies of oral speech "that do not do the participant justice in a written version of what he or she said" (Seidman, 1991, p. 93). The words of Lisa and Stephanie are compelling and articulate clearly

that from their point of view, the violence they witnessed impacted their learning and behavior in school and thus their reading achievement. Therefore, excerpts of their stories are reproduced in this section without further references to the professional literature and without interpretation.

Lisa

My Dad signed some papers with a guy. They were friends and my Dad signed for him because they were going to get a car for the guy. Once my Dad went to pick up the money and the guy was mad about something. He [the guy] said, "Hold on, " so Dad was just standing there waiting. His brother [the guy's] came in back of Dad and then the guy said, "Well, you know something?" Dad goes, "What?" Then the brother lifted up a hammer and hit Dad in the head! I was watching them from the car. My Mom didn't see because she was out of the car brushing the seat clean because we had bought some hamburgers and the French fries got on the seat. I saw when he pushed my Dad and hit him with the hammer. I wanted to get out, but my Mom said, "No, don't get out because we're leaving." I didn't want to tell her because she would get scared, but when he [the brother] hit Dad again and again, I just screamed. My Dad [came and] yelled to Mom, "Get in the car!" He went like that [motioned sharply turning a steering wheel]. There were lots of cars coming but he didn't even pay attention. There was a store and he went in [it to] call the ambulance. The ambulance came and they thought it was my Mom because she was pregnant. Mom told them, "No, not me!" Then my Dad got out of the car. He was wearing a white shirt and his shirt was full of blood. So they took him.

My aunt took us to my Grandma's house. She goes, "What's wrong?" Tia [aunt] Maria told her and she started crying. She went to the hospital and they all came back around three or four in the morning. Dad was okay.

When my Dad used to drink and he didn't come home until the next day, my Mom and him used to get in fights. Once Mom got his clothes and threw them outside. She said, "You know what, I don't want you here anymore. You're just causing me problems because you get drunk and waste all your check."

He went out and turned the truck on and called to us and said, "Don't worry, kids -- I'll keep working and half the check will be yours and half for your Mom and we'll see what I'll use for me." We started crying. A week later he came back and he promised he was gonna change. Mom believed him 'cause he sounded serious, but he started again.

I was hurting a lot. Just thinking about that all the time instead of reading and stuff -- thinking about it and being scared. Maybe if the teachers know, maybe they would -- I would help her [a girl like me] if I was a teacher. I would help her by reading to her and help her read and help her understand. All the time I'd think about it and I couldn't concentrate and they [parents] didn't have any money because he wasted the checks and the fighting and all of it.

I feel scared. that first day I couldn't sleep because I thought they [the guy and his brother] were going to come to our house and burn it or something like that. It was scary, very scary. I think about it all the time. I think about it when I'm in school. It's hard to concentrate on the books and listen to the teachers.

Stephanie

I think that I write slow and read slow and I can't pronounce the words right. [It's because of] the way I acted in class -- real crazy, crazy. I would always get up and walk around in kindergarten. I would walk all around. I got in trouble and the whole class made fun of me saying, "Stephanie got in trouble. Stephanie got in trouble." [I was still messing around a lot in first grade], yeah. Second, a little bit. Third, a little bit too. Fourth, not that much. fifth grade, a little bit. [And this year] a tiny bit.

Once I heard my Mom yelling. Dad was mad at her. I went to Mom and was moving my hands on her face. Dad said, "Your Mom is going to have to move out of the house." I go, "Why?" He goes, "Because she's been a bad girl. She's doing bad things that she's not suppose to do." [Mom was gone] for a few weeks and then she came back. They started doing nice things. They would take all three of us out to dinner. [I was] glad but scared. I [was in] kinder then and when I was being naughty, it's because Dad and Mom were fighting. In first grade, Dad ran over Mom [with the car]. My sister told me that Mom got run over by Dad on purpose [over] by the canal because he was mad. She [Mom] went to the hospital and then my Dad was very sad and I was very sad. We went to go visit her. [She was in the hospital] for three months. She had lots of scars and bruises. A few months later, they got back together again.

Dad was trying to get all three of us. Mom was fighting for us. She said, "I want all three of the kids."

He would tell Mom, "No!"

She said, "I raised these kids, these are my life!

Dad goes, "These are my life too!"

Mom told him "You'll have to get them. You'll have to take them away from me!" Then we were hiding in some big apartments [because] he was going to kidnap us. I was a little girl. [I felt] bad and then glad. I was all mixed up.

[One day] Mom told him, "That is enough. We have to settle this right now. Right here."

Dad said, "No, let's settle it another day." Dad left to go drinking. Mom got worried when Dad came the next morning. Dad was drunk and Mom locked the doors so Dad couldn't hurt us. [He was] banging the doors and banging and knocking and banging. She was afraid to let him in.

He was abusing her -- not just that one time. She has scars all over her. I heard them a lot. One time Dad was on top of Mom and choking her. My sister and my brother started yelling and crying, "Stop it Dad! Leave her alone!" Dad got off and went in the other room looking for a knife so he could stab her. Mom ran to Grandma's house to call the police. The police came and arrested him and he stayed in jail for a few weeks.

When Dad was abusing Mom, I asked my sister to read to me. Mom and Dad were arguing all the time. When they were yelling and yelling, I didn't want to hear so I would ask my sister to read to me so I could hear her voice not the yelling. I was nervous and scared even at school when the bad things were happening. Sometimes [the bad things caused problems] at school.

Conclusions

Lisa and Stephanie experienced extreme stress in the primary grades because of the violence they witnessed. They each attributed their low reading achievement, in large part, to that stress. According to Bell and Jenkins (1991), "violence exposed children may have lowered self-esteem and show a decline in cognitive performance and school achievement. these school difficulties. . . may be a result of the child being distracted by the intrusion of thoughts related to the trauma, making it impossible to concentrate on school material" (p. 178). Those words are a haunting echo to Lisa and Stephanie's words. There is sufficient evidence in this study, together with other studies in the literature, to conclude that further research is needed to examine the relationship, if any, between exposure to violence in the early grades and difficulties with literacy acquisition and achievement. If a relationship is found, then educators can look for effective ways of meeting

the academic and emotional needs of students who have been exposed to violence. Thousands of children like Lisa and Stephanie need help.

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